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Teachers Learning to Differentiate Instruction  
for Struggling Learners in Mixed Grade Classrooms

by

Rachael Arens

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Education at the  
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## ABSTRACT

Meeting students' individual needs becomes more important as diversity increases in Canadian classrooms. The wide variation of student abilities creates an increased organization of curriculum and instruction in language arts to ensure equal success for every student.

Differentiated instruction is an instructional model that enables teachers to meet students' individual needs. Much of the current research on differentiation has been conducted in the United States and focuses on gifted learners. This inquiry is designed to investigate the proficiencies of two mixed grade elementary teachers' implementation of differentiated instructional strategies with struggling readers in the Windsor area and to explore strategies that aid struggling readers with grade-level text. This qualitative case study included teacher interviews, observations and checklists.

On-going assessments, flexible grouping, and teaching reading strategies were noted as key elements to implement differentiation. Shared reading, guided reading and literacy centers were three reading strategies that provided students differentiated work with grade and readiness level text.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Research Problem

Canadian classrooms are becoming more diverse and there is a corresponding demand to meet the needs of the large number of second language learners and the inclusion of special education students. Today's schools must accommodate students from different ethnic groups, language groups, cultural, social and economic groups, with different interests, abilities and styles of learning. An increasingly diverse Canada is obligated to meet the needs of all its students. This diversity of student population creates an increased organization of curriculum and instruction in language arts to ensure equal success for each child.

In the face of all this diversity, individuals need a curriculum and instruction that match their needs. Differentiated instruction meets the needs of individual students by applying several avenues to meet a goal. A differentiated instructional approach has been suggested as a model that may help meet students' diverse needs by adjusting and modifying the curriculum and providing many approaches and strategies that work for individual learners.

Children come to school with vast amounts of knowledge and experiences, some children struggle while others excel in school (Tomlinson, 2000). The full inclusion model of placing all levels in the same classroom has increased the demand on teachers to try to meet the needs of individual students that are making up general classrooms. The emphasis is now on inclusion and equity, providing appropriate curriculum material and modifying and adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of all students. Many teachers have recognized their students' diverse needs and have moved away from instructions



that teach to the “middle child.” Teachers are concerned with meeting students’ individual needs because it may have an impact on school success.

Traditional teaching methods target homogeneous groupings, whole class instructions and limit the amount of differentiation. Struggling students spend most of their school day with teachers who have little or no training in designing and implementing differentiated instructional strategies. Teachers find themselves unsure of how to adjust instruction in response to students’ readiness level, interest and learning profiles. It is still unclear how teachers understand and are implementing a differentiated approach.

### Related Studies

Overall, there exist a limited number of university studies on differentiated learning, especially in Canada. Two of the major studies were conducted in the United States. In one study, Koski (2005) focused on reading strategies in inclusive classrooms. Results indicated the need for comprehension building, word identification and study strategies. Struggling readers were supported with opportunities to practice reading strategies and differentiated instruction. In the other study, Grimaldi (2001) conducted a case study on two elementary classrooms where teachers had success with implementing differentiated instruction. The classroom practices included adjusting instruction to meet individual needs, practice with reading strategies through guided and independent instruction, various types of reading and writing activities, literacy rich environments, flexible groupings, strong classroom management and explicit instruction in skills.

### Deficiencies in the Studies

Most of the current literature to date comes out of the studies in the United States in contrast to the limited number in Canada. In order to address successful reading strategies for the Canadian population, we must understand the unique characteristics of Canadian students and ways in which Canadian teachers differentiate instruction for split grade classrooms. Although there may be many similar practices utilized by both Canadian and American literacy teachers, it was important for research to be conducted within the Canadian school system and increase Canadian awareness. In addition to the lack of Canadian research, there were a scarce number of American studies that involved struggling learners using differentiated instruction. These deficiencies led me to want to explore how Canadian literacy teachers implement differentiation and aid struggling readers with grade-level text.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore ways in which differentiated instruction was implemented to meet the needs of struggling learners, particularly through grade-level text by two teachers in their classrooms within the Windsor Essex Catholic School Board. At this point in the study, differentiated instruction refers to an approach that provides a variety of strategies that aid in the academic growth of struggling learners.

### Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1.) How are teachers implementing differentiated instruction in grades 2/3 language arts for learners who struggle?

2.) In what way is differentiation proposing to meet the needs of struggling learners through grade-level text?

### Importance of the Study

This study is important to teachers for a number of reasons. Teachers are expected to meet the needs of a diverse student population within their own classroom. The heterogeneous classroom requires teachers to differentiate in order to meet the instructional needs of their students. Teachers will learn more about meeting the needs of struggling students by the identification of strategies that can aid their reading growth by utilizing their strengths. It is important for teachers to realize the better they know their students, the better they can maximize students' growth by understanding their individual needs. With additional research supporting the use of differentiated instruction and new teachers implementing it, the approach may encourage additional teachers to implement and experience success with differentiated instruction. Administrators may also benefit from such research by providing teachers encouragement and support with the knowledge of strategies that aid struggling readers. These strategies will be identified from this study to create a starting point for new teachers curious about strategies and approaches to aid their struggling learners in language arts. The study will offer insight into the teachers' experiences implementing a differentiated approach and add to the paucity of literature on the topic in Canada.

### How the Study Began

“Teachers need to have a firm understanding of a broad range of ways to enhance literacy development and have the wisdom and courage to try different approaches with different learners for different task” (Spiegel, 1991, p.11).

This quote describes the actions that two teachers took in order to differentiate in their classrooms. In September 2005, I observed two teachers who started teaching split-grade classrooms. These teachers prepared instructions that provided students with the necessary skills and abilities to perform according to expectations laid out for specific grade-levels. Both teachers ultimately were cognizant of the varying levels of their new students and instructional ways in which to reach all children. After reviewing reading assessment and running records on their students' reading abilities, it was clear that reading levels in their classroom ranged from below grade-level to above. At this point, the teachers questioned how they would provide instruction, particularly how each child would be able to read at or above grade-level by the end of the year. The teachers also wondered how to keep skilled readers challenged and interested while providing additional support for struggling readers. The teachers asked how they would be able to meet the needs of all their students and began searching for ways to meet individual needs.

In December, the teachers were given the opportunity to participate in a pilot project as part of a teacher education program. The professional development program was designed to improve differentiated instructional practices and included in-service, on-going in-class teacher consultation and mentor support. This was in contrast to a one-time in-service workshop model, which was traditionally available to teachers and provided little support and resources during the implementation of a new instructional practice. Teachers were aware of the diverse needs in their classrooms and wanted to prepare instructions that fit the needs of their students.

These teachers wanted to deliver developmentally appropriate instruction while providing lessons that stimulated and acknowledged that students learn in various ways. Therefore, there was a need to examine the use of differentiation as a way of meeting the needs of an academically diverse student population and how it was being implemented into our diverse classrooms.

### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research proposal, the following terms were defined as:

#### De-tracking

The process of eliminating grouping practices based on academic abilities and instead, grouping students with various abilities, learning styles, interests and different backgrounds in the same class (Wheelock, 1992).

#### Differentiation

Instruction that modifies and provides multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas and expressing what students have learned. A differentiated classroom modifies and provides different avenues through content, process and product led by students' readiness, interest and learning profile. Differentiated instruction refers to meeting individual needs through multiple instructions and accommodations and modifications of curriculum material to enhance the success of each child. (Tomlinson, 2000).

#### Diversity

Term used to describe the relative uniqueness of each individual in the population. Diversity encompasses such factors as age, gender, race, ethnicity and ability.

### Heterogeneous groupings

A method of grouping students who have varying learning profiles, different abilities, racial and ethnic origins and socio-economic backgrounds for the purpose of instruction. Therefore, a homogeneous grouping is a grouping of students of similar learning profiles, abilities and racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Paratore, 2000).

### Inclusion

Students with disabilities are placed in “regular” classrooms according to their appropriate age and grade level (Rudd, 2002).

### Mainstreaming

The placement of ESL students into "regular" classrooms, either for one class or for the whole day, creating a theoretical “inclusive” environment for the student.

### Reading Wars

The dispute over the best way to teach reading that is being carried out by advocates of the phonics and whole language approaches to teaching reading (Quatroche, 1999).

### Summary

This chapter discussed the need for research relating differentiation and struggling readers. Many classrooms in Ontario are becoming more diverse, increasing the need for instructions that foster individual needs. The lack of research in this area may prevent teachers from discovering additional ways in which to aid their struggling readers. Therefore, teachers need strategies that enable them to be reflective to respond to the diverse and ever-changing needs of their students. This study involves a discussion on

how teachers implement differentiation and how teachers work with grade-level text.

During both of these cases teachers are working with struggling readers.

The next chapter will discuss specific topics related to both struggling readers and differentiation. Academic literature on both these topics and related topics will provide a theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following chapter provides an overview of the following topics: differentiated instruction, struggling readers, five essential reading components, curriculum documents, the importance of reading grade-level text, reading wars, effects of reading wars and research-based strategies. The review of literature starts with the definitions of differentiated instruction and struggling readers because these are the two main topics in my study. The reading war presents current difficulties with several language arts programs and the history behind a differentiated approach. This major concern is discussed and concluded that differentiation is a possible solution to blending a number of literacy approaches. The overview of the current curriculum discusses the concern for struggling students and turns to a differentiated approach to meet the needs of all students that make up general classrooms. The review of literature concludes with a discussion on research-based strategies, which results in two studies that support a differentiated model and many of the strategies discussed throughout the review of literature. As a whole, the following overview leads to considerations for incorporating a differentiated approach.

#### Differentiation

Research has found that children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and students with learning disabilities have not fared well in our schools (Maheady, Malleete & Harper, 1991). In traditional classrooms, the teacher primarily works with the “middle learner” before working with the non-achievers (Gallagher, 2003). Tomlinson’s (1999) study determined how novice teachers come to understand and address the needs of academically diverse learners during the earlier stages of their teaching in a three-year



project. Teachers received little encouragement to differentiate instruction and struggling learners were described as misbehaved, unable to stay on task and do their work. These teachers were noted as being frustrated by struggling learners. Teacher education has not prepared teachers for today's diverse classrooms, which can also cause frustration.

Today's teachers do not have a variety of strategies to offer struggling students.

Therefore, teacher education programs may want to include strategies of differentiated instruction, so teachers understand how to modify or adjust the curriculum and provide instruction based on the needs of their students.

Some children need a different way to learn. A one-size-fits-all delivery system, which mandates that all students learn the same thing at the same time, no matter what individuals need, which has failed students (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2). This quotation describes the need for a differentiated model and turns away from a "teach to the middle child" approach, which has failed many students outside of the middle due to a single approach to teaching.

Bond & Dykstra (1967) and more currently Cunningham (2000) found that a combination of literacy approaches work better than any single approach. Although most literacy scholars agree that quality classroom instruction in the primary grades is the single best weapon against reading failure (Pressley, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), most also agree that despite excellent instruction, some children need more time with their teacher and time in small-group settings rather than whole-class instruction. The type of instruction they receive is also important. Differentiated reading instruction is a way to teach all students, not just an intervention or a remedial measure (Ivey, 2000).

One direction in the movement of meeting individual needs was the short-lived individualized instruction, which operated by varying the amount of time spent in learning the same material. Some individualized classrooms received packets for a unit of work and students could be promoted to higher grades without physically moving out of the classroom. Individualized instruction entailed little teaching, but many students did not have the necessary skills or self-discipline to use the instructional model out. Although individualized instruction is still used in today's classroom, work is accompanied by group activities and teacher instruction (Yatvin, 2004).

Differentiated instruction is a teaching concept, a proactive plan for diverse needs of students to maximize their growth. This is not a one-size fits all approach because children are different. When it comes to reading, there are a number of levelled readers. Educators provide different types of materials to certain students or provide materials that allow students to work in different ways or levels. The use of varied instructional techniques and strategies can enable struggling students to comprehend and master new information and skills (Grant, 2003). Differentiated instruction offers students multiple options for gathering information and making sense of it. The model of differentiated instruction assumes that rather than expecting students to modify themselves to the curriculum, teachers are to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjust the curriculum and presentation of information to learners.

Evidence indicates that students are engaged and more successful in school if they are taught by readiness levels (Vygotsky, 1986), their interests (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and their learning profile (Sternberg, Toroff & Grigorenko, 1998). Tomlinson (1995) suggests tiered activities since readiness levels in a class vary. All students can

work on the same concept, but use appropriate activities that fit each of their readiness level. The process and product are altered to enable all students to work at their currently level and continue to progress. Interest is a topic that evokes curiosity, which increases student engagement and persistence in learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1962; Sousa, 2001; Wolfe, 2001). How students learn best refers to their learning profile. Teachers offer learning activity choice to address preferences for learning shaped by learning style, intelligence preference, culture and gender. With different modes of learning offered more students may experience success in chosen tasks (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Stenberg et al., 1998).

Tomlinson's (1999) identifies the following key principles of differentiated classrooms. The teacher is clear about what is important in subject matters. Student differences are understood and appreciated. Instruction and assessments are inseparable. Differentiated classrooms provide on-going assessment, where teachers can determine students' readiness level and modify student's individual lessons. Differentiation only occurs if the student needs the modification or if it increases the likelihood that the learner will understand the important ideas. Content, process, and product are adjusted in response to student readiness, interest and learning profile. According to Tomlinson (1999) the content (what) refers to the curricular elements modified for the learners' needs. This includes meeting with small groups to reteach an idea or skill for struggling learners. Process is the activities that students use to understand key ideas and skills. In order to provide struggling learners additional support, teachers can vary the length of time a student may take to complete a task. Product is where the understanding and learning is demonstrated and extended. The teacher can also address the need to modify

the learning experience. The key reasons include access of learning, efficiency of learning and motivation to learn, which can all be tied to the student's readiness, interest and learning profile. Students and teachers are both collaborators in learning. Individual success, growth and flexibility are key to differentiated classrooms.

In differentiated instruction, students can be found working in flexible groupings. Flexible groups allow children to work in differently mixed groups depending on the goal of the learning task. Teachers no longer accept the fact that some children, by design, simply cannot meet grade-level expectations. The evidence suggests that when we group students appropriately and provide adequate learning opportunities, we can in fact, raise the bar for all students. When children are grouped according to their reading ability, low-performing students have been found to consistently maintain low levels of performance (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LaPore, 1995). These results have lead to flexible groupings, which provide periods of time working with peers of varying ability levels. Flexible groups consist of whole group, teacher-led and student-led instruction, small groups and individual work. Flexible grouping changes to meet the needs and goals of both student and teacher. Decisions for grouping can include many possibilities that fit student learning needs and the curriculum goals as long as that grouping is not the constant choice of instruction. The teacher can divide students into small groups, which allows the teacher time to work with struggling readers and make the most effective use of instructional time. While the teacher is working with struggling students that need assistance the other students can work on a tiered activity. Students are given sufficient time to complete tasks and the pace is based on their readiness. Teachers can also shape the lessons around the student's interest, learning profile and experience. Guided reading

sessions can be done through flexible groups, which allow teachers to differentiate the five essential reading components.

Differentiated instruction offers a number of elements that makes it effective. The approach is eclectic (Goodman, 1992), encompasses a balance of multiple theoretical perspectives (Baumann & Ivey, 1997), supports teachers' experience and research (Cunningham, 1997), incorporates guided reading, shared reading, independent reading and read-alouds (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), uses multiple goals for student success (Baumann & Duffy, 1996, December) and is flexible and diverse enough to accelerate the reading growth of all children (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1996).

### Struggling Readers

It is important to discuss struggling readers because I am particularly concerned with how differentiated strategies affect these students. In this section, I will present difficult areas for struggling readers and five essential reading components that may aid these difficulties.

The ability to read is a critical component of school success, but learning to read is a complex process. Although most children grow in their mastery of this process, there continues to be a group of children for whom learning to read is a struggle (Quatroche, 1999). Research has been devoted to closing the gap between struggling readers and their grade level peers. For example, the Matthew effect in reading explains that struggling readers avoid reading while skilled readers seek additional opportunities to read (Stanovich, 1986).

There are two broad classes of emergent literacy skills. The first class is literacy-related skills, which includes reading with accuracy and fluency (sound and letter

knowledge) and the second class is language skills where the focus is on vocabulary and conceptual knowledge (growth of reading comprehension). Struggling readers have adequate general language ability, but have cognitive weaknesses in the literacy-related domain (Carnie, Silbert, Kame'enui, Tarver & Jungjohann, 2004). They have difficulties learning to accurately and fluently read text. Jen describes her struggling readers as students who cannot work independently because they have a hard time reading the material. At-risk readers are largely from families of lower socioeconomic status. These readers are immediately at-risk because they have limited required concepts that teachers assume they have (Carnie et al., 2004). It is important to identify at-risk students because a majority of children at-risk for difficulties in learning often become struggling readers.

Struggling readers need five essential reading components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2004).

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. It is auditory and does not involve words in print. Phonemic awareness should include phoneme isolation, identify, categorization, blending, segmentation, deletion, addition, and substitution in order to help students read. Phonemic awareness is important because it requires readers to notice how a letter represents sound and supplies an approach to sounding out new words.

Phonic instruction is the relation between letters of written language and the individual sounds of spoken language. Problems in word reading are correlated with rapid and early introductions of irregular words, rapid introduction of difficult words before mastering easier words and the absence of daily practice (Carnie et al., 2004). Some solutions are daily lessons, which include phonemic awareness exercises and letter-

sound correspondence and introductions to irregular words that appear often in the text. If students have difficulty with a particular skill, new related skills should not be introduced until the previous skill is mastered. Teachers should also introduce common letters at different times to avoid confusion.

Fluency is the ability to read quickly and accurately with ease and expression. It also deals with word recognition and comprehension. Phonemic awareness and phonic instructions help with fluency because readers transfer phonic skills to text and sound words out. Correlational research has shown a relationship between comprehension and fluency, but cannot define whether and to what extent oral fluency affects comprehension or comprehension influences oral reading (Potter & Wamre, 1990). Children who have difficulty reading read slower and recognize fewer words than their peers (Perfetti, 1985). Fluency can often be a neglected component of reading instructional programs (Rasinski, Padak, Linek & Sturtevant, 1994). Repeated reading can be part of a reading program that improves fluency (Samuels, 1979). Many teachers use guided reading, choral reading, partner reading and finally independent reading, which gives students many opportunities to re-read the text. This order is often important to students because they are able to master difficulties from the text before attempting to read independently. Students need to acquire specific strategies rather than being told to try their best. Both increase fluency, thereby enhancing their comprehension skills (Clark, 1995; Young & Bowers, 1994), but teachers should reinforce independent learners. Strategies will aid students with future difficulties, where as teachers are not always there to encourage students to try their best. Guidance and demonstration in small and whole group instruction may help readers develop skills (Carnie et al., 2004). Strategies include

re-reads, teacher read-alouds, choral reading where students touch each word while reading, displaying difficult words on a word wall, modeling reading strategies and providing additional practice for students who need it. Teachers should make irregular word lists for each text and presented them to struggling readers to increase word recognition.

Vocabulary is the name for words used in order to listen, speak, read and write effectively. There is a strong connection between the size of a child's vocabulary, how well they comprehend what they read and how well they do in school (Carnie et al., 2004). A reader's limited amount of reading decreases the appearance of words and recognition. As beginning readers, children use the words they have heard to make sense of the words they see in print. They have a difficult time reading words that are not already part of their oral vocabulary. Children who are poor readers often do not have the vocabulary knowledge they need to get meaning from what they read. Therefore, vocabulary is important to children's' comprehension. As children learn to read more advanced texts, they must learn the meaning of new words that are not part of their oral vocabulary. Children can learn vocabulary in two ways. Indirectly from hearing and seeing words as they listen, talk and read and directly by determining the meaning of certain words. Teachers need to point out new words before reading a story. These words should be discussed and added to a word wall to further expand children's vocabulary. Struggling readers should spend time reading at their level to avoid many unfamiliar words and failure to read effectively.



Reading comprehension refers to the capacity to perceive and understand the meaning communicated by texts. The four previously discussed areas are combined to comprehend a text, which makes all components important to struggling students.

Comprehension difficulties can be prevented by actively building skills and linguistic and conceptual knowledge beginning in the earliest grades. Comprehension can be enhanced through instruction focused on concept and vocabulary growth, background knowledge, instruction about the syntax and rhetorical structures of written language and direct instruction about comprehension strategies such as summarizing, predicting and monitoring. Comprehension also takes practice, which is gained by reading independently, reading in pairs or groups and teacher read-alouds. Oglan & Elcombe (2001) have reported that students should have opportunities to read silently allowing children to make miscues. Teachers should try to encourage students to guess at unfamiliar words and continue reading rather than correcting every error. When students read silently and make miscues the chance for comprehension increases because students no longer concentrate on proper pronunciation, pace and fluency. Students are able to read at their own pace and reread sentences until meaning occurs. Therefore, it is important for students to read silently. Teachers can ask comprehension questions in order to make sure the child has read the text and actually understood what they read. Some helpful strategies are activating prior knowledge and summarizing/retelling. When teachers want to activate prior knowledge they should reflect on what students already know and allow for predictions. Anticipation strategies such as picture walks, predictions and discussing of words in the text build up students' schemas allowing them to better comprehend their text (Paratore, 2000). Summarizing is a general recitation of key

contents from the story. Role-play, drawing, discussions, sequencing, puppetry, graphic organizers and prompts should be used to help children summarize or retell a story.

Teachers begin with instructions on phonemic awareness and finish with comprehension because all four areas combine together to allow children to comprehend their text. These five areas build a basis for beginning readers and without this knowledge readers begin to struggle. These five areas call for explicit systematic instruction. In other words, teachers outline students' expectations and lessons are organized in logical order. Preskills are taught and teachers concentrate on one skill at a time. Explicit systematic instruction focuses on small-groups, unison oral responses, teacher signaling and teaching to mastery. During whole class instructions, teachers monitor students with difficulties and direct corrections to the group rather than individuals. These five areas are important for beginning readers and should be considered for children struggling to read. A differentiated approach often incorporates explicit systematic instruction and focuses on the five areas discussed to prevent struggling readers. When these five areas are incorporated into a language arts program that utilizes explicit systematic instruction, students tend to be more successful at comprehending a text.

#### Ontario Curriculum Overview

The curriculum is often geared to the "average" child, which leaves many children unable to meet grade-level expectations. I will discuss this current concern with the curriculum and how differentiated classrooms modify the curriculum to meet all students' needs.

The degree to which students will be engaged in the curriculum is partly determined by how it will meet their needs. Meeting the needs of each individual student

is increasingly important when discussing differentiation. Differentiated classrooms focus on meeting individual needs to increase the success rate of each student. Achievement is often accomplished through meeting students' needs in regards to meeting curriculum expectations. Schools adopt one curriculum to address all learners. It is very difficult to provide schools throughout Canada with one curriculum that will meet the needs of all Canadian students. Differentiated instruction allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks and outcomes that are tailored to students' needs (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003).

The previous curriculum document also known as the Common Curriculum was implemented in the fall of 1993. It focused on five general outcomes and specific outcomes within the general areas. This curriculum was broad and open-ended allowing teachers many ways to help students achieve specific grade-level expectations. The Ontario curriculum implemented in the fall of 1997 moved away from broad and general outcomes into specific grade-by-grade statements of expectations. Four levels of achievement were specified and three areas were the focus of the language arts program. These three areas included writing, reading and oral and visual communication. The Ontario curriculum was significantly more rigorous and demanding than the previous curricula. The new precise and detailed descriptions of knowledge and skills required for each grade was quite different from the general outcomes. This movement has increased standards and teachers have moved back to the basics allowing little time for teachers to accommodate struggling learners. Therefore, meeting the needs of students are based on the curriculum. All students are required to meet grade-level expectations, but this becomes extremely difficult with the current Ontario curriculum. There are so many

expectations, but only a short period of time to get all children's needs met or in other words fulfill all the expectations. This is where differentiation has been discussed as lending a helping hand to both teachers and students. Teachers are able to modify the curriculum, so students can meet grade-level expectations. For example, Switlick (1997) suggested that curriculum modification becomes successful when FLOW is included: That is Fit into the classroom environment, Lend themselves to meeting individual student needs, Optimize understanding for each student, and Work well with the activity planned for the lesson. Curriculum modification can be applied to general classrooms in multiple ways in order to enhance learning potentialities for all students. Only when contextual factors and principles of successful modification are taken into consideration and the modification is well designed to fulfill individual students' needs determined through extensive analyses and assessment, does curriculum modification play a vital role to move students forward in their learning.

With literacy standards on the rise, students who fail to reach these high literacy levels may not meet all expectations. The 'teach to the middle' provides a one-size-fits all, which in many cases fails to meet the needs of many slower and accelerated students. This increases students' risk of failure because struggling students do not benefit from a 'teach to the middle' approach and higher literacy skills are difficult to achieve without instructions that work for them and provide growth in their literacy skills. In regards to teachers, the main goal is to help students achieve each grade-level expectation and lessons surround that. Children are different, so providing different pathways to accomplish a common goal increases the likelihood that everyone will get to the goal. Teachers therefore, account for student differences allowing them to reach expectations

through alternative avenues. Students become less frustrated and appreciate their differences. Their needs are met by providing a pathway that helps them meet their goal.

This section discussed the current concerns with a demanding curriculum and the need to present different pathways to achieve grade-level expectations. With these accommodations set in place, more Ontario students have the opportunity to experience success.

### Grade-level Text

After reading about the curriculum overview, it is important to determine specific components of the language arts curriculum because a portion of the study focuses on grade-level text. I will provide studies on grade-level text that conclude that text characteristics affect fluency and differentiated strategies that are useful for struggling readers, especially concentrating on grade-level text.

Many language arts curriculums focus on the ability to read at grade-level. The important thing to note here is that teachers can match student characteristics to instruction and assessment. A diagnostic assessment may be used to determine a students' readiness towards reading. It is important for a student to read at their readiness level, but it is also important for students to have practice with grade-level text. Teachers can incorporate different instructional strategies based on the assessed needs of their students.

Differentiated strategies applied to reading can be designed to help students learn a range of skills including, phonics, comprehension and fluency. These skills together provide useful strategies, so students have the ability to read at grade-level. A

few studies have been conducted with grade-level text and conclude that text characteristics affect fluency, comprehension and accuracy. Faulkner and Levy (1994) examined the effects of word and conceptual overlap within grade-level texts among good and poor readers. Students read pairs of texts in four conditions: (a) words and content identical (rereading), (b) few shared words but same content (paraphrasing), (c) many shared words but different story content (word overlap), and (d) few shared words and different story content (unrelated stories). Among their findings, Faulkner and Levy (1994) report that both good and poor readers exhibited the most transfer when words and content were shared (i.e., rereading). Poor readers, unlike good readers, also improved on both speed and accuracy when texts had high levels of word overlap. Word overlap was helpful to poor readers even when the shared words appeared in different stories. Using this finding, Faulkner and Levy (1994) argued that Dowhower's (1987) results on improvements in rate, accuracy, comprehension and prosodic reading, regardless of training, could be explained by the 77% overlap between words in the practice and final texts. Similarly, the findings of Herman (1985) that poor readers read later texts faster on their first reading than earlier texts reflects opportunity to practice on a shared vocabulary. Hiebert and Fisher (2002) studied effects of text characteristics on fluency during reading instruction. Students read two types of texts from existing reading programs. Students performed significantly better on reading speed, accuracy and comprehension when texts had more decodable and high-frequency words. The largest effect occurred on reading speed. Drawing on these studies, the available evidence suggests that text characteristics affect fluency, especially among beginning and struggling readers.

Tomlinson (1999) describes readiness as the students' ability at a particular point in time towards a specific task. Teachers can use a variety of assessments to determine a students' ability or readiness. Leveling is often a difficult task for teachers, but it is critical for students. Some helpful suggestions are benchmark books where teachers can determine a students' level through running records and comprehension questions. An additional strategy is the five-finger rule where students read a page of the text without making more than three mistakes. If there are three unfamiliar words during the first read then the book is probably too difficult. Vygotsky (1978) suggests planning instructions at students' zone of proximal development to expand beyond what they can do independently. Allington (2006) suggests matching reading levels to the text children read. Reis (1998) asserted that students should be provided with curriculum and materials appropriate to their own abilities rather than their grade-level. However, readiness is constantly changing and as readiness changes it is important that students be permitted to move to a new level. Monitoring students' book choices, tapping into students' prior knowledge and providing books of interest can help children read according to their readiness. Carter (2000) stated that students need access to a variety of books and instructions on how to select them in order to become lifelong readers. In order for students to find pleasure in reading, they must have opportunities and skills to select books at their own needs, abilities and interest. Ivey (2000) also observed that diverse classrooms need opportunities to choose books that meet their interest and reading level. Interest and background knowledge are two factors that enable students to read (Sweet, 1997). Interest fosters persistence and a desire to understand, while topic knowledge supports children's word identification and comprehension by enabling them to draw on

what they know. Student choice can increase the likelihood they will read. Teachers can promote students' reading interest through regularly scheduled read-alouds and book talks that tap into their interest. Differentiating student work based on their readiness allows students to read and complete activities based on their level. Students whose understanding is below grade-level will work at tasks inherently less complex than those attempted by more advanced students. Tasks relate to the success and impact on student learning. Therefore, difficult tasks bring negative attitudes towards reading and off task behaviour. Tasks should provide a challenge, but also a chance for success. Instructional texts should be read fluently, accurately and foster achievement. Teachers should display books of different levels, introduce new books and display them and provide some choices in students' selection of books (Allington, 2006).

Guided and shared reading are two ways in which to help struggling readers work with grade-level text. Guided reading instruction within differentiated classrooms expose children to a wide range of literature, teach comprehension and teach children how to read with books that become increasingly harder. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), guided reading is an instructional setting that enables teachers to work with a small group of students to help them learn effective strategies for processing text with understanding. The purpose of guided reading is to meet the varying instructional needs of all students, enabling them to greatly expand their reading skills. Guided reading occurs in a small-group setting because the size allows for interactions among readers that benefit them all. The teacher selects and introduces texts to readers often using multiple copies of a trade book. Children are usually assessed prior to guided reading session to ensure a readiness level and an appropriate place to start instruction. A session



usually begins with a discussion led by the teacher to build or review any background knowledge necessary to read the selection. Anticipation strategies are used to set the stage for success. Occasionally, teachers will support students while reading the text, engage students in discussions and perform mini-lessons. A text selection is rarely read once because rereading enables more children to experience fluency. Struggling readers are supported in a number of ways. Most teachers use reading partners and teach children how to help their partners rather than do all their reading for them. Extra reading time is available for students below grade-level during guided reading sessions. Some teachers meet children individually while the rest of the children are engaged in centers or other activities. One way or another, children are getting the support they need including some coaching each week as they read material at either their instructional level or above. They are grouped with students who are similar in ability, needs and strengths. Instruction is then finely tuned to the needs of those particular students. Without teaching at the point of need, many students will not progress. By providing small group instruction that allows children to discover how to think about a text enables students to use strategies in other classroom reading throughout the curriculum.

It is important to note three types of words for struggling readers: comprehension, sight and decodable words. During guided reading teachers can take out eight to ten comprehension, sight and decodable words for each story and discuss them with struggling readers. Guided reading also involves teacher read-alouds where teachers model metacognitive strategies to encourage readers to interact with the text.

Shared reading is another strategy invented by Holdaway in 1979. Shared reading is different from guided reading because children meet as a whole class rather than small

groups or individually. It is important for the teacher to reach all students during these lessons. When a teacher tries to teach something to the entire class at the same time, chances are, one-third of the children already know it; one-third will understand it, and the remaining third will not. So two-thirds of the children are wasting their time (Katz, 1993). In this case, teachers will share a text (often times a big book) with students. There are a number of ways to go about sharing the text, but ultimately the teacher has specific concepts in mind. The teacher will ask students to make predictions using the front cover of the text or picture walks. Picture walks involve skimming pictures throughout the book and posing questions to the group to activate prior knowledge. The first read of the book is often for enjoyment and the teacher takes responsibility for the reading and exploration of the text using it to model good reading behaviours. During the reading, the teacher will pose many open-ended questions to address the varying levels within the class. The teacher may pause during the reading and ask for predictions because many of the books contain predictable text. Children are also encouraged to read along with the teacher. During the week, students are given greater control over the readings as rereadings occur. The increasing familiarity with the text encourages fluency. Through shared reading, teachers are able to bridge the gap between reading to children and children being able to read independently. The high degree of teacher support and the pleasure children gain from reading together has a significant impact on some reluctant readers' attitudes towards reading.

Both guided reading and shared reading produce effective lessons and incorporate useful strategies for struggling readers. It is important to note that these two types of readings are only two of the many useful lessons for struggling readers. I have chosen to

discuss these two because they are often seen in differentiated classrooms and have tremendous results for struggling readers. The strategies model reading, work on familiarity with language patterns, word-recognition, language expansion and most importantly they met individual needs by allowing all children to feel successful.

### Reading War

A few reading strategies have been discussed, but these strategies only play a small role in a language arts program. It is important to discuss the reading instruction that often directs every day lessons. In order to understand how to teach reading instruction, it is important to review the history of reading instruction. Both reading wars and effects of reading wars are discussed because it provides an understanding of how differentiated instruction came about. Teachers moved away from single instructional models to multi-method approaches to incorporate all types of learners. Some programs are discussed because many schools incorporate these interventions for struggling readers. It is important to note that the interventions do not aid all struggling readers.

For decades there has been a battle over the methods used to teach students how to read. There are two main competing schools of thought for early reading instruction. Whole language and phonic instruction focus on different philosophies and stress different skills. Whole language is based on constructivist learning theory and is a multi-system approach. Teachers provide literacy rich environments and combine listening, speaking, reading and writing. Whole language emphasizes the meaning of texts over the sound of letters in phonic instructions. Those who favour child-centered tend to favour whole language while those who favour traditional values favour phonic instruction. Phonic instruction is the relation between letters of written language and individual

sounds of spoken language. The goal is that once students master the basics, they can read a variety of children's literature (Reyhner, 2004). Emerging from the conflict is the increasing widespread view that each approach has a different, but potentially complementary role to play in the effective teaching of reading. Many teachers have decided to combine both instructions, which utilize both whole language and phonics as part of a literacy program. The reading war would not end with the focus on teachers and activities. The focus of the reading wars shifted from teachers and activities to students and individual learning needs. Teachers are now able to use information provided by research to customize instructional strategies to individual children's needs rather than creating lessons based on a philosophy. Teachers can examine a child's development in reading and respond with appropriate instruction (Wren, 2003).

#### The Effects of the Reading War

A specific vehicle for the spread of whole-language was a program known as Reading Recovery (RR). The whole language approach incorporates a balanced model to literacy and includes phonic instruction. RR is a mixed instructional model and involves a one-on-one intervention for readers, which takes place for 30 minutes a day. It is a self-improving system where students receive instruction until they are average with their classmates or develop self-improving strategies. The teacher models and encourages students to apply different strategies during the completion of reading and writing tasks (Quirk & Schwaneflugel, 2004). There are normally five components of RR: read a familiar story, read a story that was read once the previous day, write a story, work with cut-up sentences and read a new book that will be read independently the following day. Therefore, RR draws upon both phonics and whole-language theory. RR needs to be

coordinated with the regular classrooms, so students will also receive feedback and support in their classroom as they work on their strategies. RR incorporates vocabulary, comprehension, phonics, fluency and phonemic awareness, which were discussed earlier and suggested as key by the National Reading Panel (Fountas & Pinell, 1996). Guided reading is a valuable tool and has been derived from the RR. Guiding reading involves engaging students in meaningful reading in conjunction with the development of problem solving abilities. This requires teacher/peer support and work in small groups. Guided reading builds fluency, comprehension, confidence, success, increases vocabulary and utilizes students' prior knowledge. It is important to realize that not all students need guided reading. These students could benefit from an independent reading program, which works on promoting growth through choice and readiness. The argument for RR is that struggling readers need more than effective short-term interventions, these students need effective reading instructions in their regular classroom programs (Hiebert & Taylor, 1994).

Four Blocks (Cunningham, 2000) is a balanced literacy approach that is incorporated directly into the classrooms. Four blocks is both a model of multi-level and multi-method instruction. The language arts program is divided into four blocks including guided reading, self-selected reading, writing and working with words. Guided reading, which was previously discussed and includes multiple copies of a text that exposes children to a wide range of literature. Comprehension skills are taught and struggling learners work on reading at their grade-level. The text selection at times will be too easy or difficult for some students. Hall and Deffee (1998) explain that if the grade-level text is too easy the other three blocks will provide opportunities to go beyond the grade-level

text. However, teachers do make adaptations for struggling students. Teachers choose one grade-levelled text and one easier text each week and students reread the story each time for a different purpose and format.

The second block is self-selected reading, which is like reader's workshop. Children are able to choose their own text and parts they will respond to. The teacher needs to monitor this process, so students work close to their level to enhance their reading growth. Students have opportunities to reread texts, "pretend read", "picture read", "read all the words" and share with teachers and students.

Writing is the third block, which is like writer's workshop and begins with a ten-minute mini-lesson where the teacher models think-aloud. The mini-lessons include writing strategies, teaching different writing stages or what students have difficulty with. It is important to provide opportunities for students to write. Fang & Cox's (1999) study concluded that interactions between reading and writing processes reinforce children's skills in both areas and contribute to an expansion of their functional language potential. Therefore, both areas should be included in classroom instructions because growth in one area promotes growth in the other. Teachers meet with students in conferences to monitor their progress and prepare them for published work. Students are able to choose their own topic and write according to their level. Struggling students may need to meet their needs in small groups where the teacher can reteach strategies, provide feedback and discuss problems.

Working with words is the fourth block where students read and spell high-frequency words and learn patterns that allow them to decode and spell a greater number of words. Students practice new and old words daily with a number of strategies, which

include rounding up the rhymes, making words and guessing the covered word. The approach combines whole language and phonics, but it may not be the best possible approach for each individual child (Wren, 2003).

The two interventions work while, especially when four blocks is used as a classroom program and struggling students receive RR daily. The combination may have positive results for a majority of students when quality instruction is utilized, but some students still show no improvements. The approaches work more for the “average” child, especially in the four blocks program. It does not offer many enriched experiences for gifted students or opportunities for small groups nor does it take into account the individual needs of struggling students. The downfall of the RR intervention is the short-term use and the increased number of students entering the program. Funding or additional teachers need to be provided for the increased number of students. This leaves many struggling students working together with one teacher, which is no longer able to aid students one-on-one or in a small group setting. Four blocks lacks providing many small group interactions, one-on-one tutoring, immediate feedback and extra support for students with difficulties. The two approaches have students receiving similar instructions throughout the day and differentiation is at a minimum. Therefore, these two approaches combined do not give struggling students enough support to enhance their skills and move up to grade-level. Research provides guidelines for educators because essential teachers build their own classroom and lessons that meet the needs of their students. The problem with most of the research is that every method and program has evidence that proves they work, but the studies are often contradicted by other evidence (Allington, 2006). This is because there is no one best way to teach and some programs

and methods work with certain children, teachers, schools and situations. Therefore, we know that the most important reason that not all interventions work is because children are different. Differentiated instruction on the other hand takes account for different learners and is a multi-method approach. A differentiated model enhances the downfalls of four blocks and RR. Students have many opportunities to work in small groups, their individual needs can be met and they never read material that is too easy or difficult. Text readings are selected according to students' readiness, which makes the task meaningful and enhances literacy skills. If students read at grade-level with difficulty, support is always set in place. Differentiation also incorporates phonics, whole language, reading and writing. The model makes up for the downfalls by focusing on individual needs and meeting them according to students' readiness.

### Research-based Strategies

Daily literacy instructions are important to struggling students. These students need opportunities to read often and develop thoughtful literacy (Allington, 2006). These two research-based strategies are useful to struggling readers and should be incorporated into a language arts program. I have also included additional research on the two American studies discussed generally in the previous chapter. Both of the studies discuss the benefits of a differentiated approach to teaching language arts and give evidence to many strategies discussed in this study.

Students need to read a great deal to improve accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Lower-achieving students often read less because reading is difficult for them. This could also be due to the fact that students spend more time reading one at a time with the teacher rather than high achieving readers whom silent read. Rossow (2001)



concluded that students who struggle with reading are given less time to read at their own reading level. Whole class instructions often focus on text at grade-level and struggling readers do not benefit from this type of instruction without support. Strategies used by many students who read at grade-level do not work the same for struggling readers when used on the same text. Struggling readers are able to read less than proficient readers in the same amount of time during independent reading time. Guthrie (2004) suggests that educators need to accelerate struggling readers by equalizing the volume of reading they achieve. This requires teachers to provide many opportunities for their students to read, develop reading strategies that aid their individual needs and instructions that work with different students' readiness levels. This can be difficult for teachers because some struggling readers are pulled out of the classroom for remedial instructions. Teachers need to coordinate their timetables, so that struggling readers do not fall further behind by missed lessons or opportunities to read. The rest of the class could work on reader's/writer's workshop when these students are pulled from the classroom.

The second opportunity teachers need to incorporate into their classroom is thoughtful literacy. Research suggests moving away from traditional models of instruction (Guthrie, 2004), especially for struggling readers who need instructions that foster thoughtful literacy. Thoughtful literacy requires readers to go beyond making connections. Literate talk includes summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating ideas in the text. Literacy often combines remembering and understanding. If students remember do they necessarily understand? The fact is if we only focus on remembering than we impede understanding. Teachers need to focus on both to successfully use thoughtful literacy. Thoughtful literacy does go beyond these two dimensions and focuses

on developing skills that require students to think. Tasks have to be designed to allow students to think and demonstrate their understanding of what they have read. Teachers need to provide opportunities for their students to express their thoughts and engage them in the text. These require careful planning and use of small groups. Teachers need to differentiate lessons to provide thoughtful literacy for all learners (Allington, 2006).

Many factors contribute to low level achievement in reading. Teachers observe a lack of interest in reading, student inability to choose appropriate books, inadequate feedback from teachers, a lack of basic skills and limited access to a variety of material, amount of reading time, time to practice reading strategies, variety of teaching practices and opportunities to reread texts at and beyond students' readiness level. Teachers need to provide instructions that can take account for all of these elements. Differentiated instruction may be flexible enough to take account for elements that can increase reading achievement.

Koski (2005) focused on reading strategies in inclusive classrooms. This qualitative study captured successful reading strategies in order to meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles, levels and abilities. Results indicated the need for specific reading strategies including comprehension building, word identification and study strategies. In addition, differentiated instruction and high interest grade level books were critical to reading instruction in inclusive classrooms. Finally, the study concluded that struggling readers need to practice reading, be surrounded by reading material and have opportunities to practice and implement strategies to improve their reading skills. Grimaldi (2001) conducted a case study on two elementary classrooms where teachers had success with implementing differentiated instruction. Two high, two average, and

two low performers in two classrooms, one first grade and the other second were observed over a two week period in order to determine teachers' instructional practices. The classrooms exhibited effective and exemplary teachers and their classroom practices included adjusting instruction to meet individual needs, practice with reading strategies through guided and independent instruction, various types of reading and writing activities, literacy rich environments, flexible groupings, strong classroom management, and explicit instruction in skills. Additionally, the teachers used high-quality literature and multiple texts to build on concepts and background knowledge and balanced direct, guided and independent learning. Rereading grade-level texts, direct instruction with teachers, and independent reading were available for struggling readers to practice with reading strategies. Teachers varied text and materials in order to meet the needs of individual students by providing a range of independent reading and encouraged children to read at their ability level. Teachers also monitored literacy performance with the use of running records, retelling, observations and work samples. Both teachers in this case study were noted at being successful at adjusting instruction to meet the individual students' needs.

Both studies were conducted in one elementary school and cannot be generalized to be true for all teaching and learning situations. Grimaldi's (2001) study grouped students into three categories according to their academic performance, which limits the number of diverse students in the classroom or the students placed between the three categories of performers. None of the randomly selected focal children in the first grade classroom received literacy instruction from the special education teacher during the literacy block where as the second grade classroom received additional support during

literacy. Writing was never observed because it was outside of the observation period and literacy was also taught in other subjects areas throughout the day that were never observed. The teachers in the study all had Master degrees, several years of teaching experience and additional support in their classrooms. This suggests that additional resources were available to these teachers to help them effectively implement differentiated instruction.

### Summary

Differentiated instruction takes account of all children in a classroom and can be used in any class. It accounts for individual learning styles and provides daily small group instructions, mini-lessons and practice for struggling readers without time constraints. Struggling readers' needs are met through practice; small group instruction; incorporating readiness levels; interest; varying learning profiles; working on skills that need further development, and varying the product, process and content to account for individual needs. Lessons are modified and adapted according to the students' needs and teachers develop additional instructional strategies to aid struggling children. It seems that differentiated instruction utilizes a combination of methods, strategies and practices that are based on individuals in the classroom to provide opportunities to maximize reading growth. The strategy is effective because it enables different approaches to meet the ever-changing needs of learners.

The next chapter contains the design and methodology. This includes how the research was conducted and analyzed, descriptions of where and who took part in the study, qualitative research, role of the researcher, and strengths and delimitations of the study.

### CHAPTER III

#### DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was used for this study in order to capture teachers and students in their natural setting. “The purpose of qualitative research is to understand human experience to reveal both the processes by which people construct meaning about their worlds and to report what those meanings are” (Hull, 1997, p. 14).

I intended to provide a holistic and detailed picture of differentiated instruction through exploring strategies used for struggling readers. In order to describe literacy strategies provided by teachers who implemented differentiated instruction, a case study methodology was selected in order to use multiple sources, individual teachers and classrooms. The intrinsic collective case study also included ethnographic approaches to include the researcher as a participant-observer. I chose ethnographic methods to give the participants a chance to express themselves and capture how they aided struggling readers and implemented differentiation. Ethnographic methods were also used due to my collection of detailed field notes, interviews containing open-ended questions and documents supporting descriptions of classroom materials. Ethnography is not defined by how the data is collected, but rather the lens in which it is interpreted (Merriam, 2002). Due to the unique situation of special support resources and the implementation of differentiated instruction into split grade classrooms through the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board an intrinsic case study was used. The University of Windsor worked with the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board to provide a successful integration of differentiation. The University provided mentor support, workshops and materials to teachers involved in differentiating their language arts classrooms. The case

was intrinsic (Creswell, 2004) because this was the first time the university and the school board worked together in Windsor to enhance teachers' success in incorporating the new instructional practice, differentiation. The study was collective in nature due to the two separate locations of classrooms. A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1998). Merriam (1998) states that case studies are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system such as an individual, event, group, or intervention. A patchwork case study was used because there were multiple case studies of the same research entity, using a snapshot design. The snapshot design is a detailed study of the research at one point in time. The study is characterized as heuristic to confirm what is already known about differentiated instruction.

#### Role of the Researcher

The questions raised in this study sought to investigate strategies utilized in differentiated instruction and struggling readers. My limited year of teaching experience and pre-service education has left many gaps in working with struggling readers and differentiation. I questioned how to actually go about differentiating my own instructional approach because the guidelines were so broad. The study was designed to fill gaps in my knowledge and prepare me to potentially differentiate and provide reading strategies when working with struggling readers. My role as a participant-observer was the instrument of my data collection. I played an open role where my presence was known and intentions were clearly laid out to participants. I have been able to work with the teachers outside of the natural setting as well. We worked as a team to plan language arts

lessons and find ways to differentiate them. I was also able to observe and interview these same teachers in their natural setting for the purpose of understanding how to implement differentiation and work with struggling readers. By submerging myself into the environment, I was able to gain an understanding of the actual process of differentiation rather than standing on the outside with little knowledge looking in. The additional time on the inside has increased the credibility of this study.

### Participants

The prime criterion for participant selection was teachers learning to implement differentiated instruction in split-grade level classrooms in Windsor-Essex Catholic School Board. Where names have been used, they are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the individual teachers involved in this study.

Jen was a teacher of two years, from split-grade classes outside of Windsor. She relied on special education staff, parents, colleagues and conferences for information about struggling learners. She was between the age of 20-30 and had received no special education qualifications. She had been successful at implemented differentiated instruction in her classroom and working with struggling readers. Jen had also stated that a number of her children were benchmarked at a level 1 at the beginning of the year and have moved to a level 10 or beyond by the end of the year.

Cindy was a teacher of thirteen years and had currently completed her first year in a split-grade classroom within Windsor, Ontario. She had completed both a B.Ed and a M.Ed and was between the ages of 31-40. There were two students that worked with the Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC'd) working on formal Individual Education Plan (IEP's) and four working with accommodations. She had not received

any special education qualifications and relied on special education staff, colleagues and reading (journals, books) to inform her about teaching struggling learners. There was an educational assistant that assisted during language arts and a co-op student that helped in the afternoon. The classroom consisted of a medium/high diverse class in terms of socio-economic, ethnic make up and academic ability. Cindy had also reported about specific gains in reading levels in her classroom.

I chose to write about these two teachers because they have made lasting impressions on me and made differentiation come to life. I was astonished walking into their classroom for the first time, I felt so welcomed and at ease. I have recognized their continuous effort through their implementation of differentiating and their ability to grasp the material so quickly. I never knew what to expect from these two teachers because they were always trying something new and provided such a wonderful environment for their students. Their responses were insightful and they discovered many ways in order to help their struggling learners. It was wonderful to see so much growth through these two teachers.

### Setting

Jen's classroom was located outside of Windsor, Ontario in the county. Trees and open land surround the school. The main office was located directly off to the left-hand side when entering the school. If you passed by the office you came to a long hallway that consisted of classrooms. The classroom for this study was located to the left and was the second classroom from the office. As you entered the classroom you saw green lockers lined up to the right-hand side and bright colours surrounding the classroom. The desk arrangement was a cabaret allowing students to work in groups, individually or as a



whole class. There was one student who was not part of the group and was positioned of to the right-hand side by the lockers and carpet area. Beside him were two computers for student and teacher use. The carpet area was located in the front right-hand corner and was surrounded by shelves, which contain games and books for the students. Off in the front left-hand corner was a blue rainbow table used for small group meeting with the teacher. Behind the blue table were additional resources: books, sticky wickies, charts, decodable words, small white boards and running records. The teachers' desk was located at the back of the room towards the right-hand corner, which may suggest the classroom was student-centered. A listening center with comfortable chairs was located beside the teachers' desk and was definitely utilized. The walls were decorated with students' work, a small blackboard and a white board. It was clear that this was an exciting place to be and utilized many materials and resources.

Cindy's classroom was located within Windsor, Ontario, where she taught a grade 2/3 split. The school was an inner-city school and had approximately 260 students with a transient population. The entrance of the school opened up to the main office, which welcomed staff, parents, students and visitors. Classrooms were placed around the corner from both ends of the office. The halls were decorated by students' artwork, stories and the Catholic faith. The various scenes encapsulate the learning that was taking place in each classroom. The school had a warm feeling denoted by the smiley faces and constant assistance. It was easy to tell that the students were the centre of operations. The classroom that was the focus was the third classroom on the right-hand side from the office. The classroom was filled with students' work and displays a captivating environment. The desks were also arranged in a cabaret, which created easy movement

into group work. There were a total of six round tables, a large rainbow table was located at the back of the room for guided reading or small group meetings and the teacher's desk was located at the front of the room, but was placed on an angle off to the left-hand side. Grade three students sat with both grade three's and two's and groups change continuously depending on the activity or task. It seemed that seating arrangements were not permanent because there was so much purposeful movement occurring throughout the day. The carpet area was colourful and provided room for all 23 students. Along the windows to the left-hand side were four computers that students have access to at anytime. The room also held a closet behind the rainbow table for students' belongings. The walls included an overhead screen at the front of the room and ample blackboard spaces, which was partly occupied by BUGS book club, four levels of questions, instructions for literacy centers, groups for literacy centers, and class drawings of monsters that were integrated into literacy centers. The walls were decorated with class schedules, artwork, Know, Want to know, Learn (KWL's) and world maps. The large shelf at the front of the room by the carpet area held a wonderful library of books assessable for the students. It was not difficult to see resources that could accompany different learners in the room and how the room was suitable for differentiated instruction.

### Procedures and Data Collection

In this study, triangulation theory consisted of interviewing teachers implementing differentiated instruction and observations and videotapes from their language arts classes. In addition, I collected and analyzed classroom documents.

Therefore, data collection was derived from interviews, documents, observation and videotapings.

The videotaping session consisted of a 30-minute taping, field notes, documents and a checklist (see Appendixes A & B), which was adapted from Paratore, 2000. The supporting struggling students through grade-level checklist (see Appendixes A & B) consisted of strategies utilized to supports struggling students through grade-level text and the field notes consisted of strategies used to differentiate. The checklist was completed during repeated views of the videotape, field notes were written directly following the language arts lesson and additional data was also recorded after viewing the videotape. The taping helped determine strategies utilized in the differentiated classroom and ways in which teachers differentiate instruction for struggling learners, especially focusing on grade-level text.

Classroom observations were conducted in each of the two classrooms on three separate occasions, in which one was videotaped. Observations were completed in these two 2/3 split-grade level classrooms where teachers utilized differentiation in language arts. Observations consisted of documents and three checklists, the differentiated classroom observation form (see Appendix C) and observation protocol (see Appendix D), which were both adopted from Tomlinson (1995). The differentiated classroom observation form consisted of rating how teachers implemented components in the physical environment, teachers' behaviours, student engagement, materials and instructional strategies. The ratings offered were often, sometimes, little or no evidence of implementation and additional comments were added for further descriptions. The observation protocol contained elements of differentiation. I answered yes or no as to

whether teachers were differentiating in general, content, process, product and instructional strategies. Again, additional comments were added for clarity. Documents were collected to supplement data gathered from interviews and observations. These consisted of forms of instructions, lesson plans and student assignments. Each observation lasted an hour in length and was completed during a typical language arts lesson. Extensive field notes, including descriptions, account of events and activities that pertain to differentiation were recorded. Teachers were told that the purpose of the observations was to record the ways in which they were implementing differentiated instruction and was not an evaluation.

Individual teacher interviews were conducted prior to the second observation and were audiotaped. Each session took approximately thirty minutes to complete and consisted of a semi-structured interview (see Appendix E). Dr. Tobin, a faculty member of the University of Windsor involved in the larger part of this study evaluating the effectiveness of a model of professional development on helping teachers expand their repertoire of teaching approaches in language arts conducted the interviews. Although I did not directly conduct the interviews, I was present for each session. The purpose of the interview was to elicit teacher's views about instructional decision-making and instructional practices and beliefs.

### Analysis of Data

Data was triangulated across data sources to correlate the evidence. Transcripts of teacher interviews were transcribed directly following interviews and compared with field notes of classroom observations. The observations were coded and analyzed for two purposes: construct a profile of each classroom and identify patterns in differentiated

strategies created for students of varying literacy needs. Miles and Huberman (1994) define the analysis steps as data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction, I separated the data into piles, one in which dealt with the two research questions and one that did not. This reduced the size of data that I would now work with. During the data display, I worked with the classrooms separately. I organized and compressed the information that permitted inferring. I found reoccurring themes/events in each classroom that may answer the research questions. Once I had this information, I started coding the theme. I created two separate flows charts containing the themes and supporting evidence from the data collection. I looked at similarities between the flow charts and drew additional flow charts combining the two classrooms. The flow chart provided reoccurring themes and evidence. I also referred to this process as content analysis (Creswell, 2004). I gathered information from text and sorted the content into themes. At this time a coding theme was devised based on the text. Manifest coding was used due to its high reliability. I counted the number of times a theme occurred in the coding scheme and noted specific themes that reoccurred and could potentially answer my research questions. During the conclusion and verification, I revisited the data a number of times to cross check and verify my themes. I considered what the analysis meant and assessed the implications for the research questions at hand. They were analyzed further to address specific strategies used for struggling learner and grade-level text and specific strategies used to implement differentiation.

A within-case analysis was used based on the multiple cases and a format was chosen to describe the emerging themes in each case. A thematic analysis followed by a cross-case analysis was used to provide overall themes present within the two cases.

Therefore, this study presented an embedded analysis, which only presents specific aspects of the cases, which occurred in both classrooms (Creswell, 2004).

Member checks were utilized in this study to recycle emerging analysis back through participants. According to Creswell, (2004) a member check presents the findings to the participants and gives them the opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of themes and their experience. Triangulation was achieved through connecting the data collection and the review of literature. Based on my field notes, critical reflexivity was possible due to my informed knowledge of the topic under study. I was able to clarify and move my thinking during the research. I started this research with a limited amount of strategies that could aid struggling readers and had a sceptical view of how differentiated instruction could meet the needs of a diverse student population by altering content, product and process. As the study concluded, my views of differentiated instruction have changed and I do believe that the implementation of this model produces many positive benefits for students.

#### Strengths & Delimitations

A delimitation would be the selected participants. This study merely focused on the strategies utilized by split grade level teachers. Any strategies identified in this study may not necessarily be to those outside of the selected groups. As mentioned earlier, this study focuses on two primary Catholic schools. Much like the previous delimitations, the results of Catholic students/teachers could possibly be quite different from those within a public institution. However, the study intended to focus on teachers implementing differentiation for the first time in split grade classrooms. I was interested in split grade levels because of the increased diversity and individual needs. This places teachers more

accountable to meet all of their students' needs and address the expectations of two curriculums. This was the first study completed in Windsor and due to those unique characteristics teachers were implementing differentiated instruction for the first time.

Some additional strengths of the study are transferability and dependability. The study provided thick descriptions, triangulation and peer examinations. The two settings also provided additional insight into a classroom implementing differentiation and utilizing differentiated reading strategies.

This chapter discussed the details of the design and methodology of this study. The following chapter will discuss what resulted from the analysis. Each of the three themes are described in detail including, teacher's quotes that support the findings. Recommendations, implications, future investigations and answers to the two research questions are also provided.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

This chapter presents my finding in researching the implementation of differentiation and grade-level text. The results were supported by interviews, observations and documents collected during the study. I first examined each component of the data collection in each of the two cases and then combined themes between the cases to gain an overall view of how both teachers implement differentiation and differentiated strategies that aid struggling learners with grade-level text.

Teacher interviews revealed the use of assessments (benchmarking), definitions of differentiation, groupings arrangements and how struggling readers were supported. Observations were then analyzed to determine a match between what teachers described in their interviews and what was actually occurring in their classrooms. Both teachers were observed benchmarking their students to determine their readiness towards reading, designing flexible groupings and utilizing literacy centers, shared reading and guided reading to assist struggling readers. Observations also consisted of field notes, which provided additional comments about the areas previously discussed. Specific instructions, directions, classroom arrangements, lessons, students' work, titles of resources and management ideas were included in my field notes to capture the essence of a differentiated classroom.

Three checklists were also completed during the observations (Appendix A, B, C, and D), each provided attention to specific details of differentiation. The supporting struggling learners through grade-level text provided support for struggling readers with the use of anticipation strategies, which included before text strategies, picture walks and



predictions. During and after reading strategies, rereadings, shared reading, guided reading and the introduction to new vocabulary and sight words were also indicated as important strategies for struggling readers.

The differentiated classroom observation brought evidence that both teachers used flexible groupings, assessments and a variety of materials, including centers to meet individual needs. The observation protocol was more specific in terms of how teachers differentiated. Both teachers differentiated content, process and product according to students' readiness, interest and learning profile with the use of benchmarking and assessments. The common components noted through this checklist were the variety of materials and resources available to students and the use of guided reading, shared reading and literacy centers as instructional strategies.

### Themes

As part of my guiding questions, I wanted to find out how teachers implemented differentiated instruction to accommodate struggling learners. My review of literature discussed several topics to take into consideration when working with struggling readers and I have concluded that a differentiated approach has many positive benefits for struggling learners. When analyzing the data collected from this study, I came across three specific themes that set up classrooms for a differentiated approach and support struggling readers: (1) student assessments are ongoing to lead instruction, (2) various flexible groupings support struggling students by working with students who have already mastered skills, and (3) teaching specific reading strategies (guided/shared reading and literacy centers) help enhance individual reading skills. Each of these

components also aided struggling readers with grade-level text. Shared reading was the specific reading strategy that aided struggling readers with grade-level text.

### Theme 1: Student assessments are ongoing to lead instruction

Implementing differentiation is a process, which allows for all students to get on board. Teachers incorporate different strategies at different times to allow students to adjust to the changes and appreciate the differences among them. It takes time to add new strategies into the classroom, especially when teachers are differentiating content, process and product according to individual needs. Students cannot be seen as treated being differently, but valued based on their differences. Building a positive community that accepts and values differences was important for teachers implementing differentiated instruction. One of the teachers in the study used Tribes (TLC) in order to build a community within her classroom (Gibbs, 2000). She connected tribes to differentiation and stated that tribes teaches children to “trust each other and learn to not be judgmental.”

This became an important part of her classroom, especially when incorporating differentiated instruction because it allowed her students to value and appreciate each other’s strengths and help other peers through their difficulties.

It is important to discuss how teachers in this study defined differentiation and factors involved in preparing students for a differentiated approach. Jen described differentiation as “meeting the needs of my student. You have a common goal and provide different ways of getting there.”

She implemented differentiated instruction by accessing each child in her class through the schools’ benchmarks to focus on their reading needs. Jen described the process of benchmarking as:

A way of levelling the students at their reading level. It deals with fluency, comprehension and so on. It goes up to level 30. Level one starts out at the JK/SK level and I think level 30 is a grade 5 level. It is a way of testing how they read, their comprehension and now you have them at a level and provide text for their own need. It's a way of differentiating by providing texts at their level and it's an in-depth look at their strengths and weaknesses. It really goes into fluency, comprehension, self-correction and so on. It is a good analysis of their reading skills.

Clearly, Jen recognized that children in her classroom were at different reading levels and mentioned to keep note of that when grouping her students, assigning tiered activities and determining appropriate reading texts. Determining students' readiness towards reading was the first step to provide adequate instructions. Therefore, assessment and instruction were used interchangeable in differentiated classrooms. Jen and Cindy both mentioned that students were benchmarked several times a year to provide texts and instructions that tailored their individual needs. Jen had a reading program in her classroom where students read at their readiness level. Jen also provided opportunities for students to read at a higher level with parental support. This not only helped struggling students by reading at their own readiness level, but involved parents and additional support systems for reading beyond students' readiness. The take home program consisted of:

Taking home a reading folder every night and recording what books they have read. They know what level they are at from the pm benchmarks. I have a whole area set out with bins and levels. Every night they know that they should be taking

a book home at their level. They know they can take a higher level, but will need some support and that is fine. To be reading on their own then they should take books at their level.

Jen did not restrict her students to specific levels and also used the 5-finger rule to determine appropriate books from the library. The five-finger rule consisted of students reading the first page of a text with less than five errors. If there were less than five errors then the text was appropriate according to the students' readiness.

Cindy described differentiation as "a program according to where the students are and challenging them at their place and pace in order for them to progress and meet with success. It's all about progress and moving on." She continued to discuss how differentiated instruction has helped a student in her classroom:

I have a little girl and yesterday we were working on a reading comprehension activity and she always freezes when it's a paper-pencil task. Yesterday for some reason she froze as usual, but I just whispered to her "no time limit, you finish this whenever you're done." It took her the longest time, but she came up with a level 4 answer. She was so pleased with herself handing it in. She is one at the beginning of the year would cry as soon as we would start something new and the tears are going away.

It was clear that Cindy's definition of differentiation according to students' place and pace was demonstrated in her story about the girl who froze by taking the pressure off and allowing her to work at her own pace, which gave her the chance to work with her actual ability. Cindy also discussed how she implemented differentiation through the curriculum and gave students' choice:

I differentiate the product on a regular basis throughout the curriculum. I differentiate activities in language arts right now and I give them their choices in language arts. What I do is have my long-range plans and I look at what expectations we need to work on. Then I think of the most interesting way to get it across to them. I try to give them choices in terms of the preferred way of learning.

Cindy also used benchmarks as a starting point to group students according to their readiness. Cindy had a process to help students achieve books at their level and it consisted of:

Choice. I do provide them the books and for the most part they will not pick something that they are going to stare at. Some will sit next to their buddy with the same kind of book then when they are working I will ask if they have tried this kind of book, it's an interesting story. I have to monitor. I would never say it's just your choice and you are stuck with that.

Both teachers had clear definitions of differentiations and understood where each of their students were according to reading levels. The benchmarking and on-going assessments determine their readiness level, areas that need work, interests, learning profiles and most importantly lead instructions for each child. The teachers in this study had reading programs that provided support for students. The programs provided students with many opportunities to read, experience success with reading and learn through other peers in the class. Struggling readers needed support and these teachers provided many different avenues in which students could receive it. Struggling readers had the opportunity to read at their readiness level or beyond, so readers always felt challenged,

but successful. It was important that teachers understood ability levels early on in order to design curriculum materials that would meet individual needs. Therefore, the use of assessments helped determine students' readiness towards reading and provided the opportunity for teachers to direct instructions based on students' assessments. Both teachers in this study reported to see a connection between Individual Education Plans (IEP) and differentiation as both a way of meeting individual needs and working where students were rather than working at grade-level. Differentiation provided everyone in the classroom an IEP. It is important to note that these teachers received support during the first six months of implementing differentiated instruction. Workshops were provided for introducing new concepts and especially strategies to use in differentiated classrooms along with special education mentors that provided on-going resources and support throughout the process. All in all, both teachers were able to set up their classrooms to incorporate differentiation. Benchmarking and on-going assessments were an initial process for setting students up for a differentiated approach.

Theme 2: Various flexible groupings support struggling students by working with students who have already mastered skills

Now that teachers had determined students' readiness towards reading, grouping students was possible. By utilizing grouping strategies and differentiating the curriculum, the teachers were capitalizing on differing ability levels for the benefits of all learners.

Jen grouped students according to:

Mixed ability and I am working on interest grouping. I split grade two's and grade three's up. I separate them so there are different ranges within each group. They can each provide something for the group and they have the opportunity to see what good work looks like and they can help each other out. I do a lot of pair

work. Groups of two or three are helpful. If we are doing charts, I like them to bounce ideas off of each other.

She also noted the benefits of working in small groups:

As for pairs, there is always something special about working one-on-one with someone. Also they don't think they are working and work is when they have to do something on their own. When they work in pairs they are more enthusiastic and they have more fun with their learning. When they work in groups they like working with other people for a common goal and they don't feel so isolated and where someone might have a weakness others have strengths. They can work together for a common goal.

Cindy discussed how she grouped her students and also commented on how small groups facilitate students' learning:

Many different ways. I group them and they group them. It sometimes depends on the activity, ability and behaviour management. I think that children love to help and be helped by each other. Once they trust and that's where tribes comes in. They trust each other and learn to not be judgmental. The thing about working in pairs is, for example, I have a student that has really just started reading and emerging. He can build a solid structure that you could move your family into. He is so gifted with building and working with his hands. I have him working with someone when it's a reading task, that's excellent because he can function and get at that activity and learn whatever the expectation is there. When he's working in pairs he can be the helper. In science, when we did structures and he was the leader in his groups. When they work together they can see themselves as helper

and helpees. Small groups help build self-image. I think they value each other too.

They value each other's gifts and talents and know that. Maybe in grade 1, we focus so much on reading, but it's true we need to be able to read to succeed.

They start to think that that person is smart because they are such a good reader, but we all know that you can be smart in other ways. We all know that we can be.

Groupings occurred for a number of different reasons and teachers grouped according to readiness, interest, learning profile and even behaviour. Groupings were always changing due to the task or expectations. Flexible groupings were definitely part of both teachers' programs, especially during literacy centers. Mixed ability groupings allowed children to use their own strengths and teach each other. Both teachers utilized small groups where children again learn from one another and verbalized their thoughts with their peers. Small groupings encouraged some choice and often lead to an environment where students felt part of something, appreciated each other and enjoyed learning together.

### Theme 3: Teaching specific reading strategies helps enhance individual reading skills

When grouping arrangements were put in place, teachers could start working on differentiated strategies. Both teachers mentioned the benefits of differentiated strategies:

Confidence. They all feel capable. They all work on something. Sometimes I pull out their math textbooks and right away I see blank go through some of the kids. I don't see that in language arts. They all feel like they can do. It gets away from everything written down. Show me what you know by writing it because I find that is a big variant for some of the students in my classroom. They know what they are talking about, but they have a hard time. They may not be fluent writers



yet. It puts up a wall between what they know and how they can express what they know. I find differentiation is a way of provided an opportunity to show me what they know. They way that they are comfortable.

I intended to gain information about effective strategies that supported struggling readers in differentiated classrooms. There were three key strategies used in these two classrooms that supported struggling readers: guided reading, shared reading and literacy centres. Guided reading and literacy centres will be discussed under research strategies because students were often working at their own readiness level and there was research that supported both of these strategies in differentiated classrooms. Shared reading will be discussed under grade-level text due to the nature of the instruction. This type of instruction was often done in whole class settings and focuses on reading grade-level text.

It was interesting that both teachers used literacy centres and guided reading in the same ways, which could be due to attending the same workshops. Centres changed frequently and students often attended two centers out of the five in a period of a week. Children were able to work at their own pace and were given a choice as to working with a partner at a centre or alone if they preferred. Expectations were clearly laid out for each centre and instructions were posted on the blackboard. If students had completed their centre they received meaningful extensions or choices depending on the center. The only difference between the centres was Cindy based her centres on themes rather than random assignments. Both teachers worked on teaching basic concepts or areas that needed work or practice. Cindy discussed how her centres have changed from last year and how she grouped students:

Last year I had grade one, we would read a poem and in that poem there would be word endings (ing). We would work on mini-lessons daily and then go to a center rotation. The centers consisted of poetry, art, drama, and writing. Each day they would rotate through the centers. Students would go to all centers and do the same work. Now, I provide the centers with choice. We still do the same mini-lessons and the centers are tiered, so there are different activities for their level and groupings are different and flexible. They work in groups. I have one student that likes to work on his own and he is encouraged to work in groups because he has so much to offer and vice versa. At times he can choose to work alone. Last week he had to work in a center and he might have felt a little claustrophobic. I think it takes it a step further. Centers are wonderful learning experiences and kids seem to really like them, but at times they need to be working and progressing. I can remember certain kids coming to mind, some get different work sheets at their centers, but they knew and you would see them working on an easier task while the others worked on their level and that was ok. They just float to where they are going.

Cindy not only used flexible groupings, but tiered assignments. This allowed her to group according to students' readiness, interest and learning profiles. Students could work on the same concepts within a centre, but the teacher could vary the complexity and openness of individual tasks. Therefore, students not only worked at a station of choice or practiced a concept, but they worked at their own level. Many of the centers had three or four levels of tiers to allow any student to attend that center and complete meaningful tasks. Jen had also tried literacy centres, which became a large part of her program:

In my centres, I used to have a whole range of grade two and three's. I also used my pm benchmarks. I had a wide range of abilities in each group and a lot of times that made the centers work because when the grade three's finished their work they could help the weaker students in their group. So it was like a buddy system there. There is always a way for them to show what they know using either way. I provide different material. I differentiate slightly between my grade two and three's. I find it easier to provide opportunities for my stronger grade two's that can do the grade three work. My weaker grade two's can get the extra support from me. The grade three's, I need to work on getting a little more high end for them. The centers that I am starting today I have them broken up by their pm benchmarks and I am hoping to focus a little on their needs within reading and so on. Work that enhances their performance.

Centres differed according to content, process and product for each student and were broken into smaller assignments to allow for more manageable parts. Flexible pacing was an additional part of centers that allowed for differences in students' ability to master key concepts. Teachers also provided a wide range of product alternatives and supported students by using a wide range of varied resources. Therefore, literacy centers supported struggling readers by allowing students to work according to their readiness through flexible pacing, incorporating their interests and needs, varying materials and resources and providing feedback from teachers and peers.

Jen discussed two literacy center tasks called think-tac-toe and 2-6-8:

It works really well. It is broken up into three rows and in each row they have to choose one box of the three to use. It provided different ways of showing their

work. They have a choice out of the three boxes of the way they wanted to show me they know. They are all categorized the same just different ways of showing it. I have used the 2-6-8. The character, setting and plot/conflict. There are two characters they have to fill in and 6 spaces that are different settings and 8 spaces for the plot or conflict. They have to fill these in and then you would have them write about their topics and make a connection between the three. It is great because they are writing about things that they are interested about.

The think-tac-toe task allowed choice and was divided up into nine boxes, which made a tic-tac-toe grid and three different categorizes. The three categories were before, during and after reading the text. Students had three choices as to what box (question) they would answer for each category. The 2-6-8 activity was used for students struggling with writing. The teacher gave some choice in the topics to provide an outline that got students thinking and interested in the assignment. Although this was a writing activity it played hand in hand in developing good readers. The task was open-ended, which allowed students to use characters, setting, plots and conflicts of interest and the numbers could be changed to give students additional opinions. This activity was beneficial to all students because they made their own connections to the topics to develop a story. The length and format were completely optional and the teacher provided support for students during this assignment by monitoring their progress. The entire class also created a story prior to the activity so the teacher could model metacognitive and good writing strategies. This encouraged students because they were able to ask good questions and be creative with their own connections.

Literacy centres were the core of these two teachers' literacy programs and provided many avenues for students. Guiding reading and shared reading provided opportunities to work with grade-level texts, readiness level texts and practice with reading strategies. Support was the main factor in helping students achieve growth in their reading skills. Teachers made themselves available to struggling learners, which is often difficult when students are not engaged in meaningful tasks and when whole class instructions were the only form of instruction. Peer assistants and mini-lessons were provided to students to support their reading needs. These lessons were only provided when students needed assistance.

Guided reading sessions were also part of literacy centres. Cindy's interpretation of guided reading was:

I benchmark them in September/October. Get them into their reading level and then I set up centers to begin with. Their guided reading groups would have tiered assignments and there are now five groups. I will provide the book, so they don't have that choice. They may choose three-four activities to work on. I will read with them at the guided reading center at one point.

Students were grouped into small groups that had similar ability, interests or needs. The sessions were teacher-led and met at least once a week. The teachers in this study reported that they often pull students experiencing difficulty with assignment to the guided reading table for a mini-lesson or help with their assignment. This suggested that meetings occurred whenever struggling students needed support. The teacher was often available to struggling students during centers because all students were engaged in their center due to the individual design of the task or station. This gave teachers a perfect time

to hold guided reading sessions that worked according to students' readiness. Both teachers used a number of different strategies during guided reading sessions to aid students with their text. The teachers used trade books according to students' benchmark level as the text for the meetings. One strategy utilized during guided reading was the anticipation strategies, which included predictions, picture walks and the introduction to new vocabulary and sight words. The teachers in this study offered students a look at the cover and a browse at pictures in the book. Students were asked to make predictions and draw their predictions on individual whiteboards. This process was done to activate prior knowledge and link the story to their experiences, which is critical for understanding and comprehending the text. Prior knowledge was only one aspect of comprehension and teachers posed additional questions throughout the story, paused to summarize the story and allowed students to make additional predictions. It was important for the students to become active readers because participation often helped them comprehend the text. It was critical to practice reading strategies and work on difficulties during guided reading. Students and teachers utilized the small group setting. Students received more one-on-one time and teachers had the opportunity to provide the group more feedback and assistance. When difficult words were encountered, teachers asked what word would make sense, sound the word out, take a guess at the word or use sticky wickies, which underlined the word so the student could come back to the word after the reading. If students had to come back to the word, teachers reread the sentence to allow the student to try and fill in the missing or unfamiliar word. When the word was known it could be added to the students' individual spelling lists for the next week or added to personalized dictionaries. Although the teachers read the text the first time through, students received additional

opportunities to discuss the text as a group or read with a partner before attempting the text alone. Therefore, three or four rereadings were part of both teachers guided reading programs.

#### Grade-level Text: Shared Reading

The strategies, previously discussed, worked according to individual readiness and often do not provide struggling students work at grade-level or above because support is often needed. Other strategies in the differentiated model offer support and work with grade-level text. The additional guiding question was how teachers implementing differentiated instruction aid struggling readers with grade-level text. Shared reading supported students while working with grade-level text. Strategies resulted from the data analysis. Many of these strategies were introduced in the review of literature and in the guided reading, which suggests that these strategies are utilized throughout a differentiated literacy program and students receive many opportunities to practice these skills. Shared reading also included three categories including, before, during and after reading. These strategies can often be found in early literacy programs. It was important to note that all of the strategies were not present during every reading. Teachers picked between the strategies, but the common pattern presented at least one strategy from each of the three categories during a reading.

Shared reading was a type of reading in addition to guided reading that allowed the teacher to incorporate many of the strategies previously discussed. The difference between shared reading and guided reading was that shared reading worked with grade-level texts as a whole class rather than small groups that worked according to children's readiness. It was important for the teachers to provide both types of readings in their

programs, so students had many opportunities to work with a variety of texts during teacher support. During shared reading, the teachers in this study chose a big book based on students' interest. The teachers shared the text through a teacher read-aloud starting with anticipation strategies. As the teacher read the story, varying students in the class made predictions, discussed reactions and posed questions. Due to open-ended questions, students with various reading levels were able to participate. It was interesting to see students make predictions throughout the text without being prompted by the teacher. It seemed that the continuous use of reading strategies taught students to use them without being prompted. When the story was completed, the teacher asked students to work in pairs or individually to make connections to the story based on their life experiences. Students were able to use the text, draw pictures, use words or all three to illustrate their connection with the text. The teacher monitored students and helped individual students through their assignment to ensure all students succeed.

Before reading strategies included anticipating the story, picture walks, introductions to new vocabulary essential to comprehension, introduction of sight words and adding sight words to the word wall. These strategies built on prior knowledge and cleared any difficulties with words before students encountered them. Anticipating the story was used in a number of ways including predictions, relating the story to student's personal experiences and drawing pictures about the topic. The introduction of new vocabulary and sight words were discussed as a list, defined and found within the text. These strategies were often used at the beginning of the text, but predictions and discussion of words were also used during and after the story depending on what the teachers saw fit.



During the reading, teachers modelled metacognitive strategies and discussed difficulties encountered. The strategies included in this section were posing questions of the text and discussing or verifying previous predictions. Metacognitive strategies provided a model of questions that a good reader asks and teaches children to pose questions of the text. Verifying previous predictions kept students on task and helped children comprehend the text by correcting any prior mistakes in their predictions.

After the reading, teachers wanted to verify that all children had comprehended the text. Retelling, reactions to the story and posing questions were strategies used after reading. Teachers also had students answer open-ended questions that required students to interpret the text relating to their own understanding. Retelling was done verbally through sequencing, acting out the story or creating a storyboard. Reactions to the story included discussing favourite parts or connecting the story to students' own experiences. All in all, these strategies helped encourage students' participation and gave many avenues to discover and comprehend a text.

### Struggling Readers Support

Struggling readers were supported in a number of ways during differentiated instruction. During reading strategies, teachers varied the pace, materials, support mechanisms, provided tasks that interest students, adapted content to all levels of students' proficiency and provided choice and feedback to students. Jen supported struggling readers by:

I buddy them up. Some of my struggling learners are sitting next to my higher end learners. I have them (struggling readers) pulled out twice a week to do guided reading with the LET teachers. So they are getting support with reading and

decoding strategies. They get the extra support with the resource teacher. I often pull them aside and do a small group instruction with them. During lessons if they have a hard time working independently then I will bring them back to the blue table with me to do a shared reading and responses as well. We work together to get answers. I do mini-lessons with them as well. I try to do assessment throughout. We just did 2-digit subtraction. Some students got it right away, some struggled with it and other students made the same mistakes over and over. I grouped them together when they needed small group instructions. I was able to have them working in groups playing games and I was able to pull them aside and work with the group on what they needed specifically helpless. This is also true for language arts.

Cindy supported struggling readers by:

Well there's peer support. I have myself of course and an educational assistant. We modify or adjust how much or what their task is. If I am meeting with a student, I might say what word would make sense in there. I ask them to find the meaning, look on the word wall, sound it out or is that word familiar.

Differentiated classrooms were flexible, presented clear learning goals, adjusted time, found a number of ways to address learners, promoted individual and whole class success, provided a variety of materials, teaching instructions and groupings.

Differentiated instruction stemmed from effective ongoing assessments of learners' needs. Teachers recognized their students' needs and monitored students in relation to their goals. The teachers in this study taught effectively because they were aware of students' learning needs and interests and incorporated them into specific tasks

throughout the curriculum. Flexible groupings ensured students access to a wide variety of learning opportunities. Struggling learners were supported by all of these elements. Reading strategies in small groups gave struggling readers the literacy skills they were lacking and provided practice with teacher feedback. Shared reading provided a way to work with struggling readers and grade-level text. Literacy centres and guided reading were differentiated reading strategies that aided students according to their readiness level. In conclusion, teaching and the use of strategies assisted in content knowledge were essential to struggling readers. The use of differentiated instruction was crucial to reinforce learning and ensuring success among students.

#### Summary of Key Findings

Three themes emerged from the data collection: students received ongoing assessments, support with reading strategies and flexible groupings. On-going assessments placed children into proper levels, which provided text selections appropriate for individual students. Flexible groupings were key to providing struggling readers with the opportunities to practice with strategies, work on task and text according to readiness levels and work with peers that had mastered specific reading skills. Flexible groupings and assessments provided means for specific strategies that needed further practice. Teachers demonstrated specific reading strategies to aid struggling readers according to the task and individual students' needs. The reading strategies included guided reading, shared reading and literacy centres. The key findings as they relate to each research question are discussed below:

Research Question One: How are teachers implementing a differentiated approach in grade 2/3 language arts for learners who struggle? All three sources of data collection

were used to answer this research question. An analysis of the data collection from observations and teacher questionnaires indicated that both teachers in the study assessed students' reading levels before differentiating instructions. The benchmark served as an initial starting point as to where students were in terms of reading level, strengths, weaknesses and how to prepare instructions according to readiness and individual needs. Both teachers clearly understood the definition of differentiated instruction, which made the implementation of differentiation possible. Both teachers also indicated that differentiated instruction was meeting individual needs through different pathways. Struggling students benefited from on-going assessments and alternative pathways to achieve their goals. The assessment facilitated direction for struggling learners and alternative pathways increased the likelihood of success for these learners. Flexible groupings allowed struggling readers to work in a variety of ways that enabled them to continuously receive support through their peers and the teacher. Guided reading supported struggling readers by providing small group instructions with teacher support. This included immediate teacher/peer feedback, demonstration of reading strategies and continuous practice with reading skills and text. Literacy centers gave students additional practice with reading strategies and skills, freed up the teachers' time to meet with students' experiencing difficulty, allowed students to work at their readiness level and pace and utilized flexible grouping and teacher/peer support. Observations indicated that both guided reading and literacy centers gave students the opportunity to read text according to their reading level and provided meaningful tasks where students could experience success. Both strategies were the bulk of the language arts program in both cases.

Research Question Two: In what ways can differentiated instruction meet the needs of struggling learners through grade-level text? Differentiated instruction offered a number of approaches and strategies and provided a variety of options for working with text selections. This study found that teachers considered the interest of their students when selecting a text and provided before, during and after reading strategies to work with a wide range of learners. Shared reading was an additional strategy that provided the opportunity to work with grade-level text as a whole class instruction. Anticipation, reactions and posing open-ended questions were the three ways in which teachers accessed all learners. Rereadings were important in both classrooms and provided practice and success with each text.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Discussion

This qualitative study examined teachers implementing a new instructional approach called differentiation. The purpose of this inquiry was to describe how teachers implement differentiated instruction, particularly differentiating to meet the needs of struggling readers. In addition, it provided ways to aid struggling readers with grade-level text. Reading strategies and instructions played an important role in helping struggling readers, but support appeared to be a continuous strategy that could meet individual needs and help struggling readers apply various reading strategies.

Both teachers recognized the importance of available reading material to students, monitoring book choices and the opportunity to read often. They felt that a struggling reader improved from practice, and as stated in my review of literature, it was important to equalize the volume of reading between skilled and struggling readers. The bottom line was students needed a variety of opportunities to enhance their reading skills. Variety and opportunities were key in differentiated classrooms. One type of instruction did not benefit all students, so variety was key to struggling readers. This included a variety of strategies, resources, materials, instructions, activities and groupings. A differentiated approach provided a several reading strategies to provide different levels for all students. The guided reading, shared reading and literacy centres provided variety, multi-level and many opportunities for students to display learning.

Interviews and observations revealed that a differentiated approach brought flexibility, variety, support and assessments. On-going assessments were the most

important component when implementing a differentiated approach. The assessments provided readiness level towards a specific task or book and lead instruction for students. Observations provided three checklists and gave evidence that teachers were implementing several components of differentiation. Both teachers provided flexible groupings, which provided a variety of opportunities for students to work with their peers, individually or with the teacher. Groupings were often based on readiness, choice or interest. Centers were the largest used activity for both teachers. The centres led to flexible groupings where teachers could vary the pace for individual learners and vary materials and resources. Students were given choice regarding centers where they could demonstrate their learning.

All of the teachers in this study reported using assessments in their room. Assessments were used to track students' progress and guide reading instruction, particularly guiding students' readiness towards selected text.

Guided opportunities were evident in both cases and provided the most support for struggling readers. Guided reading became a large part of both language arts programs and teachers reported that guided reading sessions provided small group meetings where a number of reading strategies were practiced.

### Implications

During this study, I discovered that a number of struggling students needed a variety of reading opportunities to experience success. This was consistent for both classrooms and teachers provided struggling readers with many opportunities based on their individual needs. I found this to be effective and students seemed to benefit from variety.

The research described that implementing differentiated instruction and the use of on-going assessments, reading strategies and flexible groupings aided struggling learners. The research for reading strategies is never ending for struggling readers. It is primarily the responsibility of the teacher to utilize their students as a tool to find out what works for them. Students benefited by tailored instructions that work with their learning style and readiness. It was important to create a classroom community where differences were valued, students utilized their talents, weaknesses were built upon, students learned from their peers and felt successful in school.

### Observations

1. Shared reading, guided reading and literacy centers were a large part of differentiated instruction and provided struggling students with useful reading strategies,
2. On-going assessments were important to struggling learners and drove instruction,
3. Teacher-led instructions and flexible groupings provided support for struggling students by demonstrating appropriate reading strategies.

### Future Investigation

1. This research study might be conducted in several 2/3 split classes
2. A follow up study may indicate additional ways in which these two teachers have implemented differentiated instruction, work with struggling learners and the benefits of the approach
3. An extension of the study over a longer period of time, allowing for a number of other differentiated instructional strategies that may be



implemented and observed by the researcher during classroom observations

4. A longitudinal study utilizing differentiated instructional strategies for struggling readers over an extended period of time to determine exactly which elements of shared reading, guided reading and centers meet individual needs

### Final Reflection

The experience of researching the implementation of differentiated instruction and aiding struggling learners has had a tremendous impact on extending my previous teaching philosophy. Reading instructions have long been debated and differentiation has left me with the hope that a combination of approaches that work on individual needs can aid struggling students. I am anxious to gain additional knowledge in this area and implement a differentiated approach into my classroom.

During the research, I was fortunate to not only learn from the two teachers implementing differentiation, but work with these teachers as well. I have been introduced to a number of strategies that aid struggling students and I was fortunate to really see this come to life in these two cases.

In conclusion, I understood very little about differentiation before starting this research inquiry. The topic has rarely been discussed in my experiences and certainly was not included in my teacher-training program. I have had the experience to see teachers implement a model that may be effective in teaching a wide range of learners. The most fascinating part of differentiation was the amount of students that it appears to reach, the options it provides, and the fact that it can be incorporated into any classroom or subject area. This has given me the strategies I was unfamiliar with as a novice teacher and has

also encouraged me to continue to find ways to reach my students. The benefits of research are so great that I will continue to question and search for answers throughout my career.

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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

## Observation Checklist: Supporting Struggling Students in Grade-level Text (Students)

What kind of help will each member of this group need to successfully read and learn from the text?

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Students

| Strategies  | Yes/No | Comments |
|---|--------|----------|
| Anticipate the story (pretell)                                    |        |          |
| Retell the story  |        |          |
| Preview text and share predictions (picture walk)                 |        |          |
| Share reactions to the story                                      |        |          |
| Pose questions of the text  |        |          |
| Discuss the predictions   |        |          |
| Read a section with a peer  |        |          |
| Students read to teacher  |        |          |
| Students write in journal (use graphic organizer or prompt sheet) |        |          |
| Students use sticky wickies for difficult words                   |        |          |

## APPENDIX B

## Observation Checklist: Supporting Struggling Students in Grade-level Text (Teachers)

| Strategies   | Yes/No | Comments |
|--|--------|----------|
| Introduce new vocabulary essential to comprehension                          |        |          |
| Introduction and practice with sight words                                   |        |          |
| Add new sight words to the word wall   |        |          |
| Have students browse story/illustrations and pose questions/make predictions |        |          |
| Teacher reads story while each student follows along with their own text     |        |          |
| Utilizes shared reading/guided reading                                       |        |          |

Strategies adopted from Paratore, 2000

## APPENDIX C

### The Differentiated Classroom Observation Form

Check the appropriate box next to each item. Use the comments box to provide ideas for improvements in specific areas. If the form is completed during multiple observations, use tally marks. Review the results with the teacher as soon as possible to identify specific areas for improvements and to praise strengths.

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade/level: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Evidence of Implementation

|  | Often | Sometimes | Little or no | Comments |
|--|-------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT   |       |           |              |          |
| Presents an inviting environment                                   |       |           |              |          |
| Provides comfortable desks   |       |           |              |          |
| Contains individual, designated personal space                     |       |           |              |          |
| Arranged for teacher/student movement                              |       |           |              |          |
| Provides work areas for individual needs, including ability levels |       |           |              |          |
| Reflects current content or skills through students displays       |       |           |              |          |
| TEACHER BEHAVIOURS   |       |           |              |          |

|  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| Works with total groups, individuals and small groups            |  |  |  |  |
| Monitors individuals and small groups                            |  |  |  |  |
| Uses a variety of ongoing assessment tools such as checklists    |  |  |  |  |
| Applies assessment information to guide instruction              |  |  |  |  |
| Addresses academic, emotional, social and physical student needs |  |  |  |  |
| Provides time for students to actively process information       |  |  |  |  |
| Gives specific feedback to individuals and/or small groups       |  |  |  |  |
| STUDENT ENGAGEMENTS  |  |  |  |  |
| Works on their individual knowledge or ability levels            |  |  |  |  |
| Uses material/resources on the students' own level of success    |  |  |  |  |
| Feels respected and emotionally safe                             |  |  |  |  |
| Uses self-discipline   |  |  |  |  |
| MATERIALS/RESOURCES  |  |  |  |  |
| Includes a variety of reading levels                             |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| related to the subject or topic  |  |  |  |  |
| Are accessible to students   |  |  |  |  |
| Support the standards and topic  |  |  |  |  |
| Are age-appropriate  |  |  |  |  |
| Are up-to-date   |  |  |  |  |
| Are available in an adequate number<br>for the class size                          |  |  |  |  |
| Include appropriate reference sources<br>and materials                             |  |  |  |  |
| INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES   |  |  |  |  |
| Uses a variety of assessment tools<br>before, during and after learning            |  |  |  |  |
| Uses a variety of instructional<br>strategies and activities to teach<br>standards |  |  |  |  |
| Meets the diverse needs of learners  |  |  |  |  |
| Engages students in various flexible<br>grouping designs                           |  |  |  |  |
| Uses centers and/or stations for<br>individual and small group instruction         |  |  |  |  |
| Engages students with projects and/or<br>problem-solving activities                |  |  |  |  |

|   |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Presents students with choices in learning activities |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|



## APPENDIX D

## Observation Protocol

| GENERAL  | Yes | No | Comments |
|--|-----|----|----------|
| Pre-asses students to determine levels of understanding (readiness)  |     |    |          |
| Assess student interests   |     |    |          |
| Assess students' learning profiles   |     |    |          |
| Designs respectful assignments for all learners  |     |    |          |
| Use flexible groupings   |     |    |          |
| Varies the pace of learning for varying learners needs   |     |    |          |
| Pro-actively (deliberately) plan differentiation when design curriculum  |     |    |          |
| CONTENT  |     |    |          |
| Designs curriculum based on major concepts and generalizations and uses these as a basis for planning differentiated lessons |     |    |          |
| Clearly articulates to the students what you want them to know, understand and be able to do                                 |     |    |          |
| Use a variety of material other than the standard text   |     |    |          |
| Provides varying levels of resources and materials   |     |    |          |
| Provides various support mechanisms (e.g., reading buddies, study guides)  |     |    |          |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| PROCESS  |  |  |  |
| Designs each activity to be squarely focused on one (or a very few) key concepts, essential questions and/or generalizations   |  |  |  |
| Designs activities that require students to do something with their knowledge (apply and extend major concepts and generalizations as opposed to just repeating them back) |  |  |  |
| Uses higher level tasks for all learners (e.g., application, elaboration, etc)   |  |  |  |
| Uses tiered lessons of varying levels of challenge   |  |  |  |
| Uses activities that involve all learners in both critical and creative thinking   |  |  |  |
| Varies tasks by student interest   |  |  |  |
| Varies tasks by learner profile  |  |  |  |
| Adapts content (text) to all levels of student proficiency   |  |  |  |
| Uses supplementary materials to a high degree (models, graphs)   |  |  |  |
| Considers multiple intelligences when planning lessons   |  |  |  |
| Uses a process to help students select books at the appropriate level  |  |  |  |
| PRODUCT  |  |  |  |

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Allows for a wide range of product alternatives                     |  |  |  |
| Teacher supports students by using a wide range of varied resources |  |  |  |
| Gives product assignments that balance structure and choice         |  |  |  |
| INSTRUCTIONAL/MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES                                 |  |  |  |
| Uses guide reading  |  |  |  |
| Uses shared reading   |  |  |  |
| Uses literacy centres/interest groups                               |  |  |  |
| Uses differentiated questions in discussions                        |  |  |  |

## APPENDIX E

### Interview

How long have you been teaching?

Where did you do your teacher education?

How would you describe differentiation?

In what ways do you use differentiating in your class?

What are the benefits for your students from the way you approach LA?

What are the challenges you are encountering when you try to implement a differentiated approach in LA?

How do you group students for their instructions?

What role does classroom management plays in your decision of how you group them?

In what ways do you support struggling students in you classroom?

What do you say to a student when they are struggling with either their reading or writing? What do you find yourself saying to them to support them?

What would you say it looks like in your classroom when students are engaged?

What role do you think children's talking plays in learning?

What types of strategies have you tried out as you learn to differentiate? Have you tried any strategies from the workshops?

Were the strategies workable with the kids?

Do you see the connections between your implementation of IEP and differentiation?

Have you made changes in the instruction of the curriculum to help students reading and writing?

Is there anything else that you would like to say about working with small groups or in pairs to facilitate their learning?

Does the availability of resources help with your ability to differentiate?

Do you have a process to help student's achieve books at their level? What do you do so they don't end up with books that are too difficult or easy for them?

What is your interpretation of Guided reading?

How has the professional development, support and workshops you attended influenced your overall teaching in LA?

Could you describe the difference between just doing centers and differentiating?

It is safe to say you mostly differentiate in your LA class?

What types of support or resources do you feel you need now to continue down the road of differentiating? What are the literacy needs of individual students?

Is there anything else you would like to add about differentiation?

## APPENDIX F

## LETTER OF INFORMATION &amp; CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Title of Research Study: Teachers Learning to Differentiate Instruction for Struggling Learners in Mixed Grade Classroom.**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Ruthanne Tobin and Rachael Arens, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. This study is being conducted in partnership with the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board, which is currently implementing a professional development project for teachers as part of a Ministry of Education initiative.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Ruthanne Tobin, Faculty of Education. Telephone: 253-3000 (3828).

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to survey the various approaches currently being used by teachers of split-grade classrooms in the WECDSB to meet the needs of different ability levels. I am specifically focusing on the language arts curriculum and how a differentiated model supports struggling readers. A second purpose will focus on how differentiation supports struggling readers through grade-level text. I will study whether this model can effectively support struggling learners.

**Procedures:** If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

First, we would ask you to complete a brief checklist discussing your teaching background, demographics of your class and school and how you currently support struggling students.

Next, we would ask you to sit down with us for 45 minutes to go over the responses you provided. This will allow us to gather more specific, additional and in-depth information from you. We will also ask your permission to audiotape the interview so we can be more accurate when we are transcribing your responses.

During the course of the study, we will contact you to visit your classrooms. During one of these observations, we will ask to videotape a typical language arts activity.

**Potential risks and discomforts:** You may initially feel somewhat uncomfortable reporting about your teaching approaches. You have been asked to participate in this study based on the type of classroom you are assigned to. You are not being evaluated as a teacher in this study. We wish to gather information about useful differentiated strategies that aid struggling students.

**Potential benefits to participants and/or society:** As a teacher, you will potentially benefit professionally from the experience of learning by implementing a new practice in teaching. Participating in this research study will provide an opportunity to closely examine your own teaching practices, from the perspective of adding to your professional repertoire of approaches for teaching literacy. The students in your classroom and their families will also potentially benefit from the inclusion of evidence-based teaching practices in their classroom, which are expected to enhance their literacy achievement. Finally, your participation will help to provide much-needed data in the field of education regarding meeting the needs of diverse learners.

**Confidentiality:** All notes and materials from your participation will be kept in a file with an identification number. Your name will only appear on your consent form. None of the information gathered from the study will be accessible to staff or administrators. Only the researchers will review your audiotaped interview and classroom videotape for the research purposes, and with you at your request, for purposes of analyzing classroom interactions. You may also wish to review the audiotape in order to make changes, corrections, or comments regarding the interview. You may wish to review the classroom videotapes on your own or together with the researcher. Following the coding of information from the audio- and videotapes at the end of the project, the tapes will be erased.

**Participation and Withdrawal:** participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and if you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time, for any reason, without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. Even if you do complete the study, you have the right to request that your data be removed from the study for any reason.

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the information provided for the study "**Teachers Learning to Differentiate Instruction for Struggling Learners in Mixed Grade Classroom**" as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Participant

---

Signature of the Participant

---

Signature of Individual Who Obtained Consent

---

Date

#### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATORS

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.



---

Signature of Investigator

APPENDIX G  
CONSENT FOR AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO TAPING

**Teacher Participant name:**

**Title of the Project:** Teachers Learning to Differentiate Instruction for Struggling  
Learners in Mixed Grade Classroom

ID Number:

I consent to the audio-taping \_\_\_\_\_ of interviews with the researchers

I consent to the videotaping \_\_\_\_\_ of language arts activities in my classroom

I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that either the taping be stopped or the video-taping or viewing be discontinued. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping and viewing will be kept confidential. Tapes are filed by number only and stored in a locked cabinet.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and the viewing of the material will be for professional/research use only. There is no planned use of the data for subsequent research studies that are not part of the present project.

---

Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX H

## LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR PARENT CONSENT FOR VIDEOTAPING

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Your child's teacher is participating in a research project through the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, that is studying methods teachers use to teach language arts to students in split-grade classrooms. Over the next few months, your child's teacher will receive in-service and in-class support from project leaders, designed to help them develop strategies for meeting the needs of children at various levels of learning ability.

The title of the study is "Teachers learning to differentiate instruction for struggling learners of mixed grade classrooms".

One of the goals is to videotape some actual language arts activities in your child's classroom during May, so that we can closely examine whether certain teaching approaches are effective in improving children's development of literacy skills. We are asking your permission to include your child in the sample of classrooms activities we wish to videotape.

There are no risks or discomforts involved with the videotaping process. Even if you provide permission, if your child wished to not be in the videotape, we would not include him or her.

Only your child's teacher and the researchers will see the videotape samples, and all information will be kept completely confidential.

The information we will gather from the study will be of great benefit to individual teachers and the school board. Your child will also benefit from the professional development that the teacher receives during the project.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Ruthanne Tobin (253-3000 (X3828), Faculty of Education, University of Windsor.

## SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATORS

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

---

SIGNATURE

---

DATE

SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN

---

SIGNATURE

---

DATE

## APPENDIX I

## Teacher Background Information

ID# \_\_\_\_\_

1. Gender
2. Your age range
3. Grade you teach currently
4. How many years have you been teaching?
5. What divisions have you previously taught in?
6. Do you have special education qualifications?
7. If yes, what level?
8. Please indicate sources that you rely on for information about struggling readers?
9. How many students are in your class?
10. What is the average reading level in your classroom?
11. Do you have students that are struggling readers? If so, how many and are on IEP's?

VITA ACTORIS

NAME: Rachael Arens

PLACE OF BIRTH: Chatham, Ontario

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1981

EDUCATION: John McGregor Secondary School, Chatham

Wayne State University, MI

Bachelor of Science (Psychology)

University of Windsor, Windsor

Bachelor of Education (Primary/Junior/Immediate)

University of Windsor, Windsor

Master of Education (Administration)